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Ludwig Wittgenstein and “Metaphysics as a Kind of Magic”¹

ABSTRACT: In this article we will approach Wittgenstein’s critique of the explanatory attitude whether undertaken towards Sigmund Freud’s interpretation of dreams or Sir James Frazer’s explanation of ritual. However the clue concept will be that of magic, as something that has not been sufficiently defined in the Wittgensteinian terminology. We seek to offer an understanding of Wittgenstein’s mysterious statement that was to begin the *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough* – “What it is that is deep about magic would be kept”.

A preliminary approach to Wittgenstein and magic issue seems to introduce implicitly an affective category, which according to Wittgenstein, should be the axis of any turn to practice when studying language. The affective component present in many late Wittgenstein writings has inspired many emotivist or expressivist interpretations of his thought. However, we aim to reconsider the emphasis made by Wittgenstein on the lived aspect of religion, and his non-approval for empirical knowledge concerning such issues as a more important shift of paradigm which further elaboration is to be found in Jean-Luc Nancy’s project of deconstructing Christianity.

KEYWORDS: religion • magic • Wittgenstein • affect

In magical formulae we find a preponderance of words with high emotional tension, of technical terms, of strong imperatives, of verbs expressing hope, success, achievement².

If God had looked into our minds, he would not have been able to see there whom we were speaking of³.

¹ Acknowledgment: This article has been written during a research visit at The Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen (WAB). I want to express my gratitude to the Director Alois Pichler for his hospitality and the assistance he provided me while carrying out this project in Bergen. It is also him who attracted my attention to Malinowski’s essay *The problem of meaning in primitive languages*.

² B. Malinowski, *The problem of meaning in primitive languages*, [in:] C. K. Ogden, & I. A. Richards *The Meaning of Meaning. A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of The Science of Symbolism*, London 1946, p. 323.

³ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. G.E.M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, J. Schulte, Malden & Oxford 2009, p. 228e.

Wittgenstein began his manuscript of *Remarks to Frazer's Golden Bough* with a strange observation, which he later considered bad and removed it from the typescript:

I think now that the right thing would be to begin my book with remarks about metaphysics as a kind of magic.

But in doing this I must neither speak in defence of magic nor ridicule it.

What it is that is deep about magic would be kept. –

In this context, in fact, keeping magic out has itself the character of magic.

For when I began in my earlier book to talk about the “world” (and not about this tree or table), was I trying to do anything except conjure up something of a higher order by my words?⁴

Even deprived of Wittgenstein's endorsement this fragment informs us importantly about the originality of Wittgenstein's attitude to magic. In the era of the fall of metaphysics, the expression “metaphysics as a kind of magic” seems reminiscent of Heidegger's “ontotheology”. Nevertheless, the following statements demonstrate that something will still be kept. Wittgenstein plays on the crucial difficulty when trying to define myth, magic or religion, which consists in the problematic rigidity/rationality of the place from which we perform such a delineation or “keeping something out”.

The systematization of relations between religion, magic and science seems to require a hardly achievable cooperation between empirical studies (anthropologists), theologians, philosophers and historians. The difficulty increases given that we need to decide whether we adopt an evolutionist point of view and therefore agree as to the basic vectors of such evolution (for example, the secularization paradigm) or we prefer a historical approach, which takes into consideration the empirical divisions between those three sectors, if such divisions exist. Each of those standpoints involves further questions, for example, if we focus on magic and science in the age of Renaissance, when magic was vanishing in the darkness of the Middle Ages, what about the magical practices of Marsilio Ficino, John Dee and Giordano Bruno all of which have been inspired by the occult science of Hermes Trismegistus⁵.

Before the 19th century such issues were undertaken by the dominating religious institutions, for example, Judaism condemned magic-idolatric

⁴ L. Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, ed. R. Rhees, transl. A.C. Miles, Doncaster & New-Jersey 1979, p. II–III (hereafter: *Remarks...*).

⁵ S. J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science and Religion and the Scope of Rationality*, Cambridge 1990, p. 38–39.

practices, or the state institutions chose between acceptable and harmful rituals. It is only since that time that this issue has been studied scientifically. In such a short essay I can only recommend a rigorous monograph concerning this issue written by S. J. Tambiah entitled *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality* (1990). We must, however, note that among anthropologists the difference between magic and religion has always been a difficult question, and the basis of differentiation varied significantly. Firstly, there was the historical horizon that has inspired a number of discussions – some anthropologists, adopting an evolutionist point of view, decided that magic was the ancestor of religion (Tyler, Spencer, Frazer)⁶, others, like the French school of sociology (Durkheim, Mauss) described an opposite evolution, where magic was the effect of secularizing religion⁷. The latter was the direct consequence of discarding the most common differentiation, according to which magic was rather an individual than a collective undertaking. However, in his *Theory of Magic* Marcel Mauss has raised this characteristic of magic several times, describing magic as rite that “do not belong to those organized systems which we call cults”⁸. Another possibility was Durkheim’s division according to long-distance and short-distance goals. Malinowski has followed this division, but he denounced the tendency to describe magic as false technology, observing that magical rituals appeared only when the level of risk and chance was high, and the technical performance of an activity (e.g. fishing) was weakened. Malinowski also offered the most uncontroversial difference, at first sight, consisting of personal and impersonal supernatural forces. Magic refers to “supernatural, impersonal force”⁹, whereas in religion, even among the most magic-look-like rituals, the forces asked for in prayers are always granted by a personal God. Durkheim, who excluded Gods from his understanding of religion, was unable to deal with such a differentiation of religion and magic. But the decision of doing without gods helped him to depict totemism as the most primitive form of religion and, consequently, recognize that all societies have religions.

The delineations between religion and magic were essentially integral to the Western civilised view of the word, which was looking for signs of “primitive” enchantment and “illuminating” processes of secularization that begin with religions. This is the reason of the phenomenon observed by the famous anthropological couple Murray and Rosalie Wax of a continuous re-

⁶ Cf. D. F. O’Keefe, *The Cult of Lightning: the Social Theory of Magic*, New-York 1982.

⁷ E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, transl. K. E. Fields, New-York 1995, p. 366

⁸ M. Mauss, *The General Theory of Magic*, transl. R. Brain, London & New-York 2001, p. 29.

⁹ B. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion*, Prospect Heights, IL 1948, p. 19–22

turn to Durkheim and Frazer's distinctions between "primitive" magic and "prolific" science as if none of the anthropologists had "condemned them as misleading"¹⁰.

But on the other hand, when we recall Wittgenstein's condemnation of the rational disdain for magic as an ineffective technology, we do not say anything that would make his thought original. The juxtaposition of Wittgenstein's observation with a preview of anthropological discussions may even be noxious for Wittgenstein, because it trivializes his intentions in regard to what we will provisionally call the "turn to practice". As an example of this noxiousness, we can refer to Ernst Gellner's fierce attack on Wittgenstein in which he denounced Wittgenstein's late philosophy as being a mere epigone of Bronislaw Malinowski's conclusions based on anthropological field work. According to Gellner, it was Malinowski who

was unquestionably the first to publish the action-involved, culture-embedded view of language, and he did so at the very time when Wittgenstein was still committed to the 'mirror' or 'brass-rubbing' theory of language, and the total irrelevance of culture to the real function of thought and language¹¹.

It is in fact truth that in 1923 Malinowski published his ideas about magic as a supplement to *The Meaning of Meaning* (of Richards and C.K. Ogden, who was at the same time Wittgenstein's translator) under the title "The problem of meaning in primitive languages". According to Gellner, who himself refers to Raymond Firth, Malinowski's friend and successor at the LSE, Wittgenstein received a copy of *The Meaning of Meaning* as soon as it appeared but he may not have read it, or at least, he could have omitted to read Malinowski's appendix. Therefore, any analogies between their views may be accidental¹². But still it is striking for someone who perceives Wittgenstein as the author of practice-based meaning to read fragments authored by Bronislaw Malinowski such as this one:

But when we pass from a modern civilised language, of which we think mostly in terms of written records, or from a dead one which survives only in inscription, to a primitive tongue, never used in writing, where all the material lives only in winged words, passing from

¹⁰ R. and M. Wax, *The Notion of Magic*, "Current Anthropology", 4, 5, 1963, p. 495.

¹¹ E. Gellner, *Language and Solitude. Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma*, Cambridge 1998, p. 155–156.

¹² Cf. R. Firth, ed. *Man and Culture: An Evaluation of the Work of Bronislaw Malinowski*, London 1995.

man to man – there it should be clear at once that the conception of meaning as contained in a utterance is false and futile. A statement, spoken in real life, is never detached from the situation in which it has been uttered. For each verbal statement by a human being has the aim and function of expressing some thought or feeling actual at that moment and in that situation, and necessary for some reason or other to be made known to another person or persons – in order either to serve purposes of common action, or to establish ties of purely social communion, or else to deliver the speaker of violent feelings or passions¹³.

Invited to write a supplement, Malinowski was echoing the concept of sign-situation introduced by Ogden and Richards¹⁴. The fundamental thesis of Ogden and Richards consisted in recognizing a magical relict in the use of language within philosophical speculation. Magic was understood mainly as a spell that has an immediate impact over reality. However, Malinowski's conclusions were not only restricted to the analysis of the primitive man, but he also devoted some reflections to the nature of infantile speech¹⁵ largely being ahead Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*:

His [the infant's] joy in using words and in expressing itself in frequent repetition, or in playing about with a word, is relevant in so far as it reveals the active nature of early linguistic use. And it would be incorrect to say that such a playful use of words is 'meaningless' [...] he establishes a link of liking or disliking between himself and that object [...]¹⁶.

The potential of the magical rite that causes something to happen was recognized in the infant's early capacities of influencing its surroundings with language abilities. This performativity (using Austin's taxonomy) was discovered in the origin of language, whether observing primitives magic or children's plays.

At the same time that Bronisław Malinowski and other anthropologists were simultaneously criticising the explanatory attitude toward ritual, underlying the primitives practicality, Wittgenstein took a consequent

¹³ B. Malinowski, *The problem of meaning...*, *op. cit.*, p. 305–306: "[...] language in its primitive forms ought to be regarded and studied against the background of human activities and as a mode of human behaviour in practical manners. [...] language functions as a link in concerted human activity, as a piece of human behaviour. It is a mode of action and not an instrument of reflection (p. 312)".

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 308

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 318–320.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 321.

step, not only against explanation, but specifically against any theoretical schemes. In his *Remarks on the Golden Bough* he insisted:

we can only describe and say, human life is like that [...] Burning in effigy. Kissing the picture of a loved one. This is obviously not based on a belief that it will have a definite effect [...] it aims at some satisfaction and achieves it. Or rather, it does not aim at anything: we act in this way and then feel satisfied¹⁷.

“[I]t does not aim at anything, we act in this way and then feel satisfied”, which means that there is no logical transition between those two facts. The *Remarks on the Golden Bough* showed that what mainly Wittgenstein focused on in Frazer’s study was human sacrifice (which was probably part of the Beltane May day festival practiced in Northern Europe until the 19th century). When Frazer writes that traces of human sacrifice are unequivocal, Wittgenstein commented:

[I]t is clear that what gives this practice depth is its connection with the burning of a man [...] the question is this: is what we may call the sinister character of the Beltane fire festival [...] a character of practice in itself, or only if the hypothesis regarding its origin [the burning of man] is confirmed? {he answers} it is clear that what gives us a sinister impression is the inner nature of the practice as performed in recent times [and he adds that the inner nature consists not in particular actions [e.g. sacrifice] but the spirit of the festival¹⁸.

Therefore depth is neither in the historical aspect of the practice, nor in the personal feelings but in the way of events¹⁹. If we discover how it happened, and why it happened even a human sacrifice loses its terrifying depth. Therefore it does not matter if they were sacrificing a man; the sinister character of the rite was kept up to this day no matter if it had undergone some changes or not. What Wittgenstein blamed anthropologists for was their preference for analogies rather than differences in comparing religious rites. According to him, when looking for similarities we miss “a part of our contemplation”, which is the part that “connects this picture with our own feelings and thoughts”. This was, according to him, the deep element of our contemplation²⁰. It corresponds well to the emotive links that Malinowski noticed in children’s plays with

¹⁷ *Remarks...*, p. 2e.4e.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Cf. Th. De Zenghogita, *On Wittgenstein’s Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*, “Cultural Anthropology”, 4, 4, 1989, p. 395.

²⁰ *Remarks...*, *op. cit.*, p. 13e.

words. They are not seen as the first signs of mastery exercised over reality, because the first learned words often lack functionality in the child's life (as, for example, exotic animal names). They are not based on usefulness but on irrational affection. The "link of liking" about whose establishment Malinowski wrote seems to be something that Wittgenstein wants to preserve against explanation which always asks for the reasons of the liking. The emotivist or expressivist reading of Wittgenstein asserts that there is no reason at all. The reason consists only in the fact of expression. The famous remark which enforced such a reading of Wittgenstein is this:

If someone who believes in God looks round and asks 'Where does everything I see come from?' 'Where does all this come from?' he is not craving for a (causal) explanation; and his question gets its point from being the expression of a certain craving. He is, namely, expressing an attitude to all explanations²¹.

The main point consists in the expression, like in the first steps performed by the child in his language abilities. But do expressivist theory offer us any solution? Malinowski, Ogden and Richards, and Wittgenstein would then aim at the same conclusions: that there is something in the religious ritual that corresponds to one of the functions of speech. However, many Wittgenstein's remarks make such a thesis quite compelling, and I would like to point out that in a number of them we come across a double expression. Beyond the one acted in the case-study, the ritual, the child's experience or the involuntary act, Wittgenstein also refers to the feeling that we have when we are told, or we are witnessing such an expressive experience. It is not only the emotional apparatus of an anthropologist (like the one that Wittgenstein recognized in Frazer when the latter speaks about the dread that we feel in us when looking at Turner's picture²²) but many every day experiences.

In order to illustrate my intention I will use an example given by Richard H. Bell in an article, inspired by Frank Cioffi, and devoted to the same issue that we deal with. Bell tells about his son who:

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² Cf. M. O'C. Drury, *Conversations with Wittgenstein*, [in:] *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. R. Rhees, Oxford and New-York: "The ceremonies that Frazer described were expressions of deeply felt emotions, of religious awe. Frazer himself showed that he partly understood this, for on the very first page he refers to Turner's picture of the Wood of Nemi and the feeling of dread that this picture arouses in us when we remember the ritual murder performed there. In reading of these practices we are not amused by a scientific mistake but ourselves feel some trace of the dread which lay behind them", p. 119.

[...] ran into the room a few days ago smiling and said with a chuckle, 'Do you know what I just did, daddy?' I asked him 'What did you just do?' He replied: 'I just kissed all the pictures of dinosaurs in my book'. He laughed again and ran off to read some more, or kiss some more dinosaurs, or [...] What explanation is needed? Only that he has been, as he says, 'into dinosaurs' for some months now. There may be anxiety or fear involved, but we do not need some elaborate Freudian or Jungian hypothesis to explain his action. We have only to look into ourselves to see the grammar of our early childhood²³.

This example and the explanation (*sic*) that follows allows us to distinguish an essential lack in condemning explanation together with Wittgenstein. The example seems to be a good choice because of its very lively and funny character. It is hard to resist smiling, when reading it, but the part which consists in reaction of the parent or the readers is omitted in the description. Meanwhile, Wittgenstein's awareness focused precisely on the listener's reaction to the spontaneous expression. Wittgenstein was interested only in what do we see when, hearing a story about dinosaurs, we "look into ourselves to see the grammar of our early childhood" (*ibid*). But what does Bell's expression "grammar of our childhood" mean? The grammar is to be understood as working in practice. Does this mean that we have to refer to our narrow experience of childhood joy? It would be difficult, because possibly we will not even remember the age when something so ridiculous as kissing pictures of dinosaurs led to such an ecstasy. Besides, it is not the recognition of similarities (in grammar, or rituals) that makes us smile. On the contrary, it is something that Georges Bataille would call expenditure, insisting on its uneconomical character of pure excess. To quote Wittgenstein, "we don't aim at anything, we just do and feel satisfied". So what about Bell's following reference to Freud's "needless" hypothesis?

According to Frank Cioffi, Freud in Wittgenstein's philosophy is subject to the same disapproval as Frazer because of his explanatory practices²⁴. Cioffi suggests that Wittgenstein attempts to

²³ R. H. Bell, *Understanding the Fire-Festivals: Wittgenstein and Theories in Religion*, "Religious Studies", 14, 1, 1978, p. 123.

²⁴ Cf. F. Cioffi, *Wittgenstein on Freud and Frazer*, Melbourne & Cambridge 1998: "When we come to Freud the case is the same. Even if Freud did not provide as much textual warrant for Wittgenstein's charge of confusion between explanatory and clarificatory enterprises as he in fact does, this would not necessarily absolve him from having addressed the wrong question. Wittgenstein's objections to Freud compel us to distinguish and address individually the same two epistemically distinct issues as his objections to Frazer: the conceptual question, "what issues can reflection, rather than investigation, resolve?", and

alert us to the fact that there are occasions on which the 'self' we are attempting to fathom – or its products, like dreams – does not figure as merely a datum for causal explanation but as a complex intentional object whose multiple aspects we are striving to discriminate, articulate and arrange and towards which we are trying to clarify our feelings²⁵.

In fact, Wittgenstein's attitude towards psychoanalysis is ambiguous. His own interest in mental psychology is well known. When he recommended his friend Maurice O' C. Drury the psychiatric specialization after he had graduated from medical school, Wittgenstein himself became acquainted with the medical staff of St. Patrick hospital and regularly visited some of the mentally ill patients. He even went on to criticize Drury's methods. Once Drury confided him that he sometimes feels puzzled before the illness symptoms, and he does not know what to say, to what Wittgenstein replied:

You must always be puzzled by mental illness. The thing I would dread the most, if I became mentally ill, would be your adopting a common-sense attitude, that you could take it for granted that I was deluded²⁶.

It is also in Drury's recollections of Wittgenstein that we find several remarks about the philosopher's fear, sometimes in the form of individual confessions, sometimes suggesting some scientific concern that Wittgenstein himself compared to psychoanalysis. If put side by side with those statements where Wittgenstein explicitly criticized Freud, this similarity needs further reflection:

it seems to me that my dreams are always an expression of my fears, not, as Freud thought, my wishes. I could build up an interpretation of dreams just as cogent as Freud's in terms of repressed fears²⁷.

We can therefore ask how Wittgenstein envisaged creating a coherent interpretation of dreams, and avoiding the mistake of explanation and reference to empirical knowledge. We will not know that because there are no other traces of such a project in Wittgenstein's legacy. But there is another analogy between Freud and Wittgenstein that could prove significant. It has been suggested by Jean-Luc Nancy, who devoted the concluding essay of his

the non-conceptual "When should questions which demand investigation give way to those that respond to reflection?", p. 12.

²⁵ F. Cioffi, *Wittgenstein on Freud and Frazer*, op. cit., p. 13.

²⁶ M. O'Drury, *Conversations with Wittgenstein*, op. cit., p. 152.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 154.

project of deconstructing Christianity to Freud²⁸. Nancy interprets Freud's invention in terms of something that we have to place between science and technique and to which the best expression he founds is "mythology". Certainly, the use of this term requires freedom from positivistic fears and prejudices. But as Nancy asserts, Freud was brave enough to say: "Die Trieblehre ist sozusagen unsere Mythologie. Die Triebe sind mythische Wesen, großartig in ihrer Unbestimmtheit"²⁹.

Nancy observes that Wittgenstein unconsciously recognized this mythological aspect of Freud's thought when he said that Freud failed to offer a scientific explanation of myth, but he created a new myth himself. "[This construct] has the attraction which mythological explanations have, explanations which say this is all a repetition of something that has happened before"³⁰. This remark had, of course, a critical intention, because if psychoanalysis were based on myth, it could not be seen as science. Keeping on with Nancy's initiative we should discern the difference between conscious recognition of "*Triebe*" as mythological being "impressive in its indetermination", and defining the whole Freud's invention as mythology. The problem is important, as it is shown in the collection of Jacques Bouveresse's essays entitled *Wittgenstein reads Freud*³¹. But Nancy brings a new outline that is stimulating to our perspective. The different way of expressing desires (or fears) offered by psychoanalysis is not an irrelevant explanation, but a mythology that is located beyond the reach of scientific understanding. Nancy evokes Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, in which the hero is the first epic poet who achieves his position in imagination and "disguised the truth in lies in accordance with his longing"; it is he "who invented the heroic myth"³². The separation from group psychology is performed through the mythical story. The heroism is acted out by linguistic expression. If so construed, Wittgenstein should have said "he disguised the truth in accordance with his fear" and would have achieved his aim. Because, as he has remarked: "the description of a wish is *eo ipso* the description of its fulfillment" and the same is true of desire. Therefore, the desire to kill the father corresponds both to the mythological legend and to

²⁸ J.-L. Nancy, *Freud – pour ainsi dire*, [in:] *L'Adoration (Déconstruction du christianisme, 2)*, Paris 2010.

²⁹ S. Freud, *Neue Folge der Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*, [in:] *Studienausgabe*, Frankfurt am Main 1933, p. 329.

³⁰ L. Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett, Berkeley, California 2007, p. 43.

³¹ Cf. J. Bouveresse, *Wittgenstein Reads Freud: the Myth of the Unconscious*, transl. C. Cosman, Princeton 1995.

³² S. Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, transl. J. Strachey, 1949, p. 115.

the psychoanalytical explanation. The first mythologist, who tells his horde how he killed the primal-father, produces an "impossible narrative"³³, because both the primal-father and himself appear only together with the story of this murder. But if this narrative inspires us with fear as it has inspired the primitives, this means that the myth has kept this spirit of being the expression of fear, not its explanation (or reason). The myth would correspond to magic in its capacity to "give representation to a wish [fear]", of expressing fear itself, rather than the object of fear³⁴. When criticizing Frazer's use of the word "ghost" Wittgenstein wrote: "if I, who do not believe that somewhere or other there are human-superhuman beings which we might call gods – if I say "I fear the wrath of the gods," then this shows that with these words I can mean something or express a feeling that need not be connected with that belief"³⁵.



Wittgenstein was interested in the way language is used. Once talking with Drury he wondered why Socrates was so admired if he was always dissatisfied with the only interesting thing in philosophy, which is listening to "examples of how [a] word is used". Instead of observing practice, Socrates was looking for "unique definitions"³⁶. Meanwhile, according to Wittgenstein, it is the use (or practice) that preserves the core that philosophy should be concerned about. This means that in the example of the boy introduced above, his expressive gesture (the kissing and the joyful narrative) is not a secondary level sign of something that is happening in his soul, and, therefore, can be recognized, but it is the primary level of expression to which nothing has to be added in order to feel its *t r u t h f u l* character. This is how metaphysics can be regarded as a kind of magic that performs conjuring tricks with some higher order. When Wittgenstein used Paul Ernst's claim that "a whole mythology is deposited in our language"³⁷, he was speaking about the lived experience of language. This deposit was an affective investment, not a sedimentation of symbols. Whenever he speaks about religion, ritual, myth or magic Wittgenstein is always forcefully fighting against explanation, but his turn to practice was not an expression of anti-theoretical methodology (as it is the case among anthropologists), but the first sign of


³³ J.-L. Nancy, *L'Adoration*, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

³⁴ *Remarks...*, p. 4e.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p.8e (emphasis added).

³⁶ M. O. C. Drury, *Conversations with Wittgenstein*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

³⁷ *Remarks...*, p. 10e.

a revolution in the nature of signification, comparable to Freud's revolution. But if, following Nancy, we speak critically or uncritically about Freud's as the creator of a new mythology, Wittgenstein's mythology based on fears, rather than desires, still needs to be reconstructed. 

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